



News Release

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests &
Thunder Basin National Grassland
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Local Big Game Herds Threatened by Human Activities in Winter Range

(STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Col. - December 7, 2011) – North Central Colorado boasts the largest elk herd in the United States, and area residents are proud of that fact. However, local wildlife officials believe that threats to winter range for elk and other big game species might jeopardize the prized herds.

Last year's harsh, long winter shed new light on the issue, as residents of the Steamboat Springs area witnessed elk mortality up close and personal, sometimes in their own front yards.

"Over the past few years we have observed more and more big game leaving traditional winter range after being spooked by human and dog activities," said Robert Skorkowsky, Hahns Peak/Bears Ears District Wildlife Biologist.

According to both U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) officials, as big game herds are forced out of native winter range due to human disturbance, the animals move to town and into inferior habitat where conflict occurs with the public, vehicles and the agriculture industry. This is neither good for the animals or the public, and necessitates seasonal winter range closures. Even in years with heavy snow, if left undisturbed the big game herds will stay on their historic winter range.

As big-game winter range on private land becomes developed, public lands become more important for wintering elk and deer herds. Thus, the Routt National Forest is asking recreational users to stay out of designated elk and deer winter range areas from November 15 to April 15.

Closure areas provide pockets of habitat where deer and elk find security and food during the harsh winter months without being disturbed by human activities.

If the current trend of disturbance and displacement continues, the size of the local elk herd ultimately may need to be reduced through management by CPW. Factor in economic impacts from the potential downturn in hunter visits, as well as damage to ranches and residences, and the cumulative effect on the area could be enormous. Additionally, it is important to note that the USFS is considering more mandatory closures, should the existing voluntary closures continue to prove ineffective.

"We do not want to be heavy-handed in managing these areas, but the voluntary closures employed over the last several years have had limited success," said Jamie Kingsbury, Hahns Peak-Bears Ears District Ranger.

The current closure areas include:

- Spring Creek Trail (Trail 1160) ***MANDATORY CLOSURE** on National Forest
- Swamp Park Trail (known as the Mad Creek Trail- NFST 1100)
- Red Dirt trail (Trail 1171)
- Hot Springs Trail (Trail 1169)

- Lower Bear Trail (Trail 1206)
- Area between the Steamboat Ski area and Alpine Mountain Ranch
- Greenville Mine area (Road 440)
- Sarvis Creek Trailhead
- Silver Creek Trailhead
- South of Long Park on Forest Road 225
- North of Toponas on Forest Road 285
- Areas adjacent to the Radium and Indian Run State Wildlife Areas

Big-game wintering grounds are characterized by areas of lesser snow depths due to lower elevations and southern exposures, and mountain shrub vegetation (gambel oak, serviceberry, and chokecherry). These areas of shallower snow provide critical food to deer and elk during the winter.

Deer and elk survive winters by using their stored body-fat reserves and every ounce of energy counts in cold temperatures. As winter progresses, human disturbance and encounters, such as snowmobiles, cross country skiers, snowshoeing, or being chased by dogs, can upset the animal's energy conservation mechanism, reducing chances for survival.

To do their part in protecting wintering deer and elk, recreationists are reminded to use the following winter recreation areas on the Forest: Buffalo Pass, Rabbit Ears Pass, Gore Pass, Lynx Pass, Bear River Corridor (entrance to the Flat Tops), and Duncley Pass. Other areas include the South Fork Trail (Trail 1100.5A) south of the Elk River with parking at the Hinman parking area (a non-motorized area) and Forest Road 430/Scott Run (Trail 1177). Another alternate area is located west of Routt County Road 129 at the Hahns Peak Lake Area on Forest Roads 486 and 488.

For more information about these or other areas to recreate outside of winter range, please stop in or contact the Hahns Peak-Bears Ranger District office at 970-870-2299, the Yampa Ranger District office at 970-638-4516, or visit <http://fs.usda.gov/mbr>.

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